

European states are using the example of Greece to justify unpopular domestic reforms.

Blog Admin

In the second of two articles on the Greek crisis as a 'trope', [Daniel M. Knight](#) writes that the Greek crisis has become a metaphor which many commentators use as a 'shock tactic' to press agendas of reform or austerity across Europe. This rhetoric simplifies the effects and intricacies of the crisis on the ground in Greece and ignores its relationship with past crises in Greek history.



The Greek crisis has come to epitomise governmental mismanagement, unregulated markets, corruption, and capitalist intemperance. In northern Europe, blame is attributed squarely to Greek citizens and their government, with layers of rhetoric constructed and disseminated globally as part of the management and manipulation of the crisis. Enduring and iconic verbal and visual imageries are constructed around this critical event. The metaphor of the Greek economic crisis has been employed in Europe as a threat of dispossession and failure if sociopolitical reform is avoided, with panic and fear being spread through uncontextualised claims which stimulate the public's interest. This contradicts the commonplace disenchantment with public politics now widespread in modern democracies.

On an international level, the messages emanating from Greece of protests, rioting, and strikes have been at the forefront of media reports for nearly four years. Unexpected and seemingly endless claims made on the funds of already hard-pressed countries for the bailouts of Ireland, Portugal, and Greece through the International Monetary Fund and the European Union have placed this issue foremost on the agenda of each European Union nation and also of the United States. Fear of contagion spreading to other poorly rated countries and a domino effect of sovereign insolvencies with banks heavily exposed to Greece have recently inflated the situation of macropolitical instability even further. The "Greek crisis" has now become a political trope, a persuasive "[story seed](#)" deployed by national governments drawing on a rich pool of metaphors and narratives to shock national populations.

Greek national identity is now defined by a perceived set of universal political and economic circumstances – in this case, crisis. The reality on the ground is not as one-dimensional as that portrayed through international media and political rhetoric. The crisis has been linked to the past, as contemporary social turmoil is [placed alongside previous crises](#) such as the Great Famine of 1941 to 1943, periods of occupation under Ottoman and German rule, and the late 1990s stock market crash. Some Greeks may claim that they are reliving the era of starvation enforced during World War II, and that land worked by one family for over five hundred years has been claimed by opportunistic foreign investment companies in a form of



Credit: linmtheu (CC BY 2.0)

"occupation" (most evident in the recent [photovoltaic program](#)). Nevertheless, the images circulated internationally claim an objective critique of a monolithic event – the Greek crisis – which disguises the

intricacy of current local circumstances.

The Greek crisis is now employed as a trope in the political theaters of Europe as a shock tactic to justify sociopolitical change. The notion of a fresh start in order to avoid economic disaster (“on the scale of Greece”) is promoted to serve many purposes. Caricatures of inept politicians leading the nation down a path to Greek tragedy are a common thread in accountability narratives particularly propagated by the European right on various international stages. The metaphor of the Greek crisis is used to help people persuade themselves of the need for change. Through inciting fear based on the rhetoric of crisis and insecurity, many neo-national political aspirations are also achieved.

The trope of the Greek crisis is especially prominent in election contexts, when blame can for a time be successfully located away from recent incumbent governments. Coming to power in October 2009, former Greek prime minister Giorgos Papandreou (PASOK) blamed the falsification of deficit statistics on the previous New Democracy government of Konstantinos Karamanlis (2004–2009). Papandreou claimed to have uncovered the “true” deficit of 13.6 per cent when taking office; it had been estimated at 1.8 per cent the previous year. The majority of Greeks initially accepted the news with the resignation that greets all exposures of corruption, for it is common knowledge that elements of the government “eat money” (*trone lefta*).

However, when the ramifications of the turmoil became apparent in the form of financial bailouts, job losses, wage cuts, and austerity measures, the Papandreou administration came in for increasing public criticism. Greeks generally became disinterested in using Karamanlis as the target of their mounting frustrations; blaming the previous government was no longer a politically viable option. Over the course of three years Papandreou became the focus of the majority of internal censure, while the blame that was directed away from the nation-state became infused with notions of colonisation and occupation.

Former deputy prime minister Theodoros Pangalos infamously placed the blame for financial crisis on the Germans: “They [the Nazis] took away the Greek gold that was in the Bank of Greece, they took away the Greek money and they never gave it back... I don’t say they have to give back the money necessarily but they have at least to say ‘thanks.’” The former mayor of Athens, Nikitas Kaklamanis, also [waded](#) into the dispute: “You [Germany] owe us 70 billion euros for the ruins you left behind [in the War]”. Local versions of this argument are not as crude, but [resonate strongly](#) with notions of colonisation, coloured with the local history of Ottoman *Ciftlikades* (landlords of great landed estates), and Turkish and German occupation.

One comparative example of the implication of the “Greek crisis” as a political trope comes from the United Kingdom. During the 2010 election – against a background of expenses claims and over a decade of highly publicised political spin – the question was constantly posed as to whether Britain faced a similar fate to Greece. Fuelled by the imagery of rioting on the streets of Athens (screened live on numerous news channels), headlines focused on how [“Britain is facing its own Greek tragedy”](#). Opposition parties suggested parallels between the Greek situation and the potential fate of Britain. The Conservative Party continues to frequently emphasise the difficulty in dealing with the remnants of Labour’s economic mismanagement, underlining that their party alone is stopping Britain from sliding toward Greek-style economic turmoil.

But what of the longevity of the “Greek crisis” as a political trope? Will this crisis remain associated with poor government, economic mismanagement, corruption, and public rebellion – a future reference point for impending crisis, as is the [panic of 1907](#) or the Great Depression of the 1930s? The Greek crisis will spend a limited time in the global public arena; its impact as a clutch phrase for political debate is finite, as neoliberal crisis continues on its messy trajectory through history and geography. Greece represents a relatively small economy, a non-Anglophone nation that is experiencing its fifteen minutes of global infamy. The moment for political opportunism based on the international panic instigated by the Greek crisis will be temporary. The power of this trope has stringent time limits.

Circulating blame happens in a situation where problems are caused within the complex flow of capital in and around the financial crisis. Concurrently, the European Union, International Monetary Fund, and most political commentators continuously seek to make clear cuts in these global flows and assign blame on

the basis of well-defined units, in particular nation-states. These units are then attributed a particular cultural character that sums up the complexity of the situation. Such essentialism provides ammunition for the construction of tropes to provoke political change beyond national borders, as processes of nationalism are overwhelmed by opaque transnational flows.

A full version of this article will be published under the title “The Greek Economic Crisis as Trope” in Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology, Volume 2013, Volume 65 (Spring 2013).

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/14qBj14>

About the author

Daniel Knight – LSE Hellenic Observatory

Dr Daniel M. Knight is National Bank of Greece Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Hellenic Observatory, London School of Economics and Political Science. His ongoing anthropological research on the Greek economic crisis addresses issues of polytemporality, historical consciousness and entrepreneurship. Daniel is currently leading a project on economic sustainability and the Greek photovoltaic energy initiative.



Related posts:

1. [The desire to blame Greece for the eurocrisis ensures that the Greek people pay the price, while the elites responsible get away free. \(11.2\)](#)
2. [Socio-economic volatility and the rise of anti-establishment politics will characterise Greece's most important election in nearly 40 years. The likely outcome is a coalition government, but will it be able to undertake the substantive reforms Greece badly needs? \(10.1\)](#)
3. [As long as the state is still seen as the centre of economic activity in Greece, and public sector reforms are seen as anti-patriotic, real and lasting reforms will remain elusive. \(10.5\)](#)